

Iolo Morganwg

Who was Iolo Morganwg? A poet, a druidic enthusiast, an author in two languages, a romantic storyteller, a political radical, a religious pioneer, an opponent of slavery, a copier of manuscripts, an antiquarian, a nation builder, and a man who succeeded in pulling the wool over of the eyes of generations of scholars...

It would be easy simply to extend the list of the achievements of this remarkable man from Flemingston. But to write this leaflet, a group of residents from the Vale of Glamorgan came together to research Iolo's history from a fresh perspective. Thinking of Iolo's strange but wonderful career, we asked ourselves what aspects of his life speak to us in the twenty-first century?

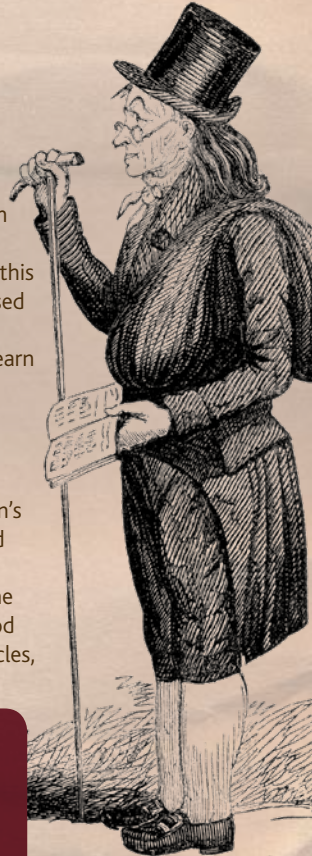
LANGUAGE

We would have to search far and wide to find anyone who used the Welsh language in a more creative way than Iolo. But one fact that struck us as a group was that Iolo's mother tongue was English. He learnt Welsh as a boy in Flemingston, a stronghold for the Welsh language at the time. He then went on to write some of the most beautiful poetry in the Welsh language, including poems that imitated the works of the medieval bards. He was so successful at this that people thought for nearly a century that some of his poems were composed by the great fourteenth-century poet Dafydd ap Gwilym! Iolo's literary career shows us that the Welsh language is available to all. It's not when or how we learn the language that's important, but what we do with it.

IOLO'S HOME

Iolo was eager to educate the world about Wales's greatness and to rebuild its status and institutions. He began this project on his own patch with Glamorgan's folk culture. He celebrated Glamorgan's dialect and sayings, and the poetry and songs that originated from the area. Iolo was committed to restoring the good name of both Glamorgan and Wales and would stand up for them when anyone dared denigrate them. He was a Welsh patriot but it was his love of his boyhood home that inspired him above all. He spent many years in London's literary circles, but it was the folk culture of his beloved Vale that was closest to his heart.

Iolo Morganwg (Edward Williams, 1747–1826), was born in Pennon, Llanccarfan and brought up in Flemingston, where he later died and was buried. He was by trade a stone mason but also worked as a farmer and a shopkeeper. His career was not always successful and he spent some time as a debtor in Cardiff prison. We remember him today, however, for his contribution to the Welsh language and culture and for establishing the Gorsedd of the Bards (considered by Iolo to be Wales's university) at a time when Wales had no significant national institutions.



Provided by Llyfrgell
Genedlaethol Cymru /
National Library of Wales

REMEMBERING

One of the Iolo's priorities was to ensure that the history of his home area and his country should not be forgotten. He succeeded in creating a memorable and lively account of that history, and the memory of Iolo himself is still very much alive in the Vale. But is the history of the Welsh language in the Vale as well known? The story of Welsh here is varied and exciting. The Norman conquest weakened the position of the Welsh language in the Middle Ages, of course. But in the early Modern Period, the language regained lost ground in large swathes through the Vale – something we weren't aware of until we started our research. Iolo was a witness to this revival, and saw parts of the Vale that had been English-speaking during his childhood become more and more Welsh in language. Welsh retreated again in the later nineteenth century but when we looked at the 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses, we saw that the Welsh language was still being spoken in Flemingston and Llancafán and in other parts of Iolo's beloved Vale. Today, we are witness to the increasing growth of Welsh-medium education in this region. However, do we in the Vale know enough about the rich linguistic heritage that is a core part of our history?

'Everyone who knows anything about Welsh literature knows something about Iolo Morganwg. That's the problem: by taking him for granted we lose sight of how remarkable he was.'

Hywel Teifi Edwards (translated from the Welsh)

THE FUTURE

Iolo, who called himself the 'Bard of Liberty', had a clear vision for the future of Wales and for the Welsh language and culture. He worked tirelessly to change society's attitudes in all kinds of areas, including those relating to religion, slavery and the Welsh language. Today, we can agree or disagree with some of his ideas, but without doubt we can recognize the steadfastness with which he announced 'Y gwir yn erbyn y byd' (The truth against the world). His relationship with the 'truth' was a complex one, as we know well by now! But the confidence this sometimes destitute man showed in the future of his country and language was exceptional.

'Here thickets romantic, irregular meads,
In order fantastic seem scatter'd around;
'Tis Nature's gay plan, has a charm that exceeds
All modes that in system can ever be found;
This wild-winding river observe in the vale,
'Tis Beauty's true line, which dull Art never saw,
By Fancy display'd, where she warbles her tale,
To the rapturous Bard on the Banks of the Daw.'
An extract from Iolo's poem 'Banks of the Daw'
(composed by the river Thaw, 1778)

'Unigryw - Unique'

Is this the best word to describe Iolo Morganwg? Perhaps. And it is a very appropriate word too — it was Iolo himself who coined the word unigryw!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT IOLO MORGANWG

'Iolo Morganwg and the Romantic Tradition in Wales' project website:

www.iolomorganwg.cymru.ac.uk

The Iolo Morganwg Trail on the Vale of Glamorgan Council's website:

www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

